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# Gender and the Popular Heroines (and Heroes) of the Young Adult Dystopia

Kara E. Hemphill

*The University Of Akron*, [keh65@uakron.edu](mailto:keh65@uakron.edu)

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**Gender and the Popular Heroines (and Heroes)  
of the Young Adult Dystopia**

Kara Hemphill

The University of Akron  
Honors College  
Spring 2015

**Kara Hemphill**

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Abstract

For the past few years, dystopian stories have ruled the young adult fiction aisles and the box office. Taking the reins from similarly popular predecessors like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, the genre has set itself apart by telling stories of action, war, and heroism that are often led by a young female protagonist. This project examines a variety of gender-related themes in six young adult dystopian novels, chosen for their popularity and subject matter. While it is not a comprehensive look at the genre, it is meant to analyze some of the most widely known works, which is important because their target teenage audience is constantly picking up messages from popular culture trends that they may not yet have the tools to critically view these works. Through analyzing these novels I found that the futuristic, dystopian setting allows authors to more easily change gender roles and presentation, write stories of empowerment and liberation, and examine modern day norms. Although the novels' mainstream appeal makes it difficult for them to be truly subversive, their influence on young adult fiction and on roles for young women in popular books and films is notable.

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## Introduction

From *Harry Potter* to *Twilight* to *The Hunger Games*, young adult fiction has seen a boom in recent years as wildly popular books are adapted into blockbuster movies. Most recently, the success of *The Hunger Games*, its two sequels, and its movie adaptation have inspired a flood of popular young adult dystopian titles, which have made their way onto the bookshelves of adults and teenagers alike. Recent books like *Divergent* by Veronica Roth, *Matched* by Allie Condie, *Pure* by Julianna Baggott, and *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner have enjoyed good sales and are set to move to the big screen, if they have not already. An older novel, *The Giver* (1993), was also adapted into a movie in 2014.

While these books are not studied for their literary merit, their incredible popularity is notable. Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy sold 27.7 million copies in 2012 (Roback), the same year the movie adaptation was released and grossed over \$400 million in North America (McKlintock). The sequel, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, surpassed *Iron Man 3* at the box office to become North America's highest grossing movie in 2013. Meanwhile, it is impossible for the average reader or moviegoer to ignore another "*Hunger Games* knock off" getting media attention.

Aside from their popularity with the general public, series like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are often lauded for featuring active female protagonists who have motivations other than romance. The settings of these series have a lot to do with the focus on action. Taking place in the future of what was once the United States, the novels generally follow a young heroine who uncovers the injustice of her society and fights it, whether through her own determination, as part of someone else's plan, or through some twist of fate. This common setup means the

story is usually one of struggle that ends in liberation, both for the protagonist and for society as a whole.

These female-led stories also break into territory that has been historically dominated by men. Dystopian fiction, and the larger genre of speculative fiction, is typically told from a male perspective. However, it should be noted that young adult dystopian fiction is not simply an imitation of classical dystopian fiction with younger protagonists. Merely comparing current popular dystopian fiction to classics like *1984* or even *The Handmaid's Tale*, which deals heavily with feminist issues, may be ineffective because the two genres are written for different purposes and different audiences. Although they share a bleak futuristic setting and address similar topics, one category is more metaphorical while the other is naturally more plot-driven. Young adult writers have twisted their dystopian fiction to include influences from war, love, action, adventure, and even espionage stories, creating a fast-paced plot that appeals to young readers. Additionally, many of these books follow the pattern of the heroic journey, with a woman instead of a man taking the lead role.

These often-female-driven stories are perhaps better compared to other young adult fantasy franchises of recent years, most notably J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*, which, like recent young adult dystopian series, became incredibly popular with readers across age and gender lines. The *Harry Potter* series, arguably the first young adult fiction phenomenon, follows a young man's heroic journey and is dominated by male supporting characters. The series' female author used her initials rather than her first name because publishers were afraid a book written by a woman would not appeal to male readers. *Twilight*, while widely denounced by feminists for its passive protagonist and problematic depiction of

romance, was hugely popular in spite of female protagonists and female authors commonly being seen as a disadvantage to marketing.

Looking at these markers, the active young heroines of today's popular dystopian fiction may be a logical evolution. If *Harry Potter* confirmed the marketability of young adult fantasy and *Twilight* opened "new territory in developing a female-oriented series into a full-blown media franchise" (Aubrey and Click 6), it makes sense that publishers and film studios now happily acknowledge female-led fantasy-adventure stories as profitable and appealing to consumers even outside of the target age range. At the same time, female writers continue to drive change in these popular young adult fantasy stories by representing young women in more diverse, active roles than they are given as supporting characters or in romance stories such as *Twilight*. These representations are often transferred to blockbuster movies, further expanding women's influence on popular culture and causing the general feeling that these stories are more progressive and feminist than their predecessors.

A closer look at individual works in this subgenre reveals themes and messages associated with third- and even second-wave feminism. Many of the books I read critique traditional femininity, emphasize choice and independence for their female protagonists, and attempt to subvert the conventions of romance. Firestone observes that the heroine of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen, is by popular opinion a "modern feminist heroine" (209), and characters in other female-centered texts follow suit as they are similarly presented as capable of changing their societies. These oppressive societies are an effective backdrop to stories about young women because they all but guarantee action on the heroine's part. Though there is always romance included, the genre most often demands that the focus is on the heroine and her struggle for liberation, not the pursuit of a relationship.

Although many of the young adult dystopian novels being published today focus on female protagonists, there are some prominent examples that feature a male protagonist. A predecessor even to *The Hunger Games*, Lois Lowry's popular novel *The Giver*, published in 1993, tells the story of a young man named Jonas living in a seemingly perfect society in which everything is completely regulated and uniform. *The Maze Runner* (2007) by James Dashner is another popular dystopian tale with a male protagonist; it also has a nearly all-male supporting cast. Both books were adapted into major movies in 2014.

These books also merit a closer look because, like books with female protagonists, they are read by a wide audience and are part of a popular culture that can be "a powerful ideological tool in teaching socially acceptable assumptions and beliefs" (Nash 12), to girls as well as boys. In popular media, portrayals of masculinity can be just as harmful and fraught with stereotypes as portrayals of femininity. Closely reading these books reveals less consciousness of gender and fewer efforts to subvert gender norms, but they are important because they are part of a group of young adult dystopian texts that are currently widely read.

This project will examine a number of topics related to gender in select young adult dystopian texts, keeping in mind their original target audience of young women and how they appeal to readers outside of that group. Individual essays will analyze specific topics in the texts including presentations of femininity and masculinity, gender roles and how authors may change them in their work, romance, and sex and sexuality. I will also examine how these texts were influenced by other young adult fiction and dystopian fiction and how they are different.

Throughout these essays I will also reference film adaptations of the books I have included. This is for several reasons. First, movies enable these stories to reach an even wider audience and serve as an entry point into dystopian franchises for many. Second, comparing the



movies to books illuminates how male directors and male-dominated Hollywood studios may change stories written by women for a different medium. Third, movie adaptations of popular books are seen as extensions of book series and are closely scrutinized by fans. Fourth, marketing for movies is more widespread than marketing for books, and has the potential to warp public perception of a series. Visual representations in the films themselves may also differ from the books in order to fit the conventions of Hollywood. All of these factors closely tie movie adaptations to the books on which they are based, making them relevant material to study.

This project is broken into sections that examine two or three books that have similar themes or plots. The first section, “Envisioning Equality: Gendered Work and Relationships in *The Giver* and *Matched*,” examines the similarities and differences in how gender is portrayed in the two novels, which both depict seemingly utopian societies that have reached what appears to be true gender equality. Because Julianna Baggott and Suzanne Collins take a different approach to constructing a futuristic society, the second section, “So Unlike People: Grotesque Femininity in *Pure* and *The Hunger Games*,” looks at how more straightforward depictions of dystopias can offer more subversive depictions of gender. All four of the novels in these two sections present changed gender roles, but they do this in different ways. *The Giver* and *Matched* maintain a vision of equality even as characters find other aspects of their societies to be corrupt. *Pure* and *The Hunger Games*, on the other hand, include more obvious critiques of femininity and other gender norms.

The third section, “The Political Power of the Young Adult Romance,” addresses the love subplots that are a staple of young adult fiction. While the addition of a love subplot can be problematic in some cases, portraying unhealthy relationships and detracting from a heroine’s agency, the novels in this report often challenge conventions of romance. One of the ways they

do this is by making the love subplot integral to the revolution. *The Hunger Games* in particular challenges the concept that romance is inherently frivolous by making it a survival strategy, but *Matched*, *Divergent*, and the film adaptation of *The Giver* also tie romance and revolution together. The final section continues the discussion of romance and intimacy in *Divergent* by critiquing its portrayal of sexual assault.

Overall, the aim of this project is not to determine why young adult dystopian fiction is so popular for the time being, or to make a case for it as an enduring genre. Rather, this trend is notable because it is one aspect of the current popular literature and popular culture landscape that often appears to make an effort to comment on gender and subvert gender norms. While it is difficult to deviate significantly from conventional portrayals of gender in a genre with such widespread appeal, the futuristic setting gives authors more room to critique the topic. Furthermore, the popularity of these works today seems to contradict preconceived notions about gender and popular culture. One belief is that stories about girls don't sell to anyone but girls, which means they aren't adequately profitable. Another is that girls are not interested in action-heavy books and films. That young adult dystopian novels have found widespread appeal in print and on the screen show this to be false. It is also important to note that female authors have played an integral role in launching the recent young adult dystopian trend, although only time will tell if it will have a long-term impact on how women are portrayed in books and films.

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### Envisioning Equality: Gendered Work and Relationships in *The Giver* and *Matched*

The most obvious oppression in dystopias tends to be determined by social class rather than gender or race, but authors cannot avoid depicting gender-based prejudice, even in novels with apparently equal or utopian societies. As Kathryn James notes in *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Young Adult Literature*, “Gender plays an important role in post-disaster fiction, not least because of the genre’s capacity to offer a space where ‘normal’ rules of behavior have changed” (166). This is especially true in dystopian novels aimed at younger readers, which often seem to consciously build a society in which contemporary gender roles are obsolete. This apparent progress, however, is often revealed to be an illusion, much like the perfection of the societies themselves. Either subversive depictions of gender still operate within a patriarchal society, or subtle instances of gender-based oppression remain.

The town in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* is a good example of an apparently utopian society that nonetheless retains gender-based prejudice. The protagonist, Jonas, lives in a town where everyone is essentially the same. People take medication to control their emotions and “Stirrings,” or sexual impulses, and the government assigns spouses, children, and jobs. On the surface, everything is in perfect balance: the population is carefully controlled, and each family is assigned a male and female child (Lowry 8). The genders are, in number, literally equal.

Jonas’s parents’ professions also suggest that there is little gendered division of labor. Jonas’s father is a Nurturer — a professional who is “responsible for all the physical and emotional needs of every newchild during its earliest life” (7). He explains to Jonas that as a child, he was more interested in volunteering with newborn babies than playing with his friends (14), which is how he knew he was destined for a caretaking profession. Jonas’s father exhibits nurturing traits outside of his job as well. Early in the book, he is seen helping his daughter Lily

remove her hair ribbons (19), which all girls of her age group are required to wear. Today, nurturing and taking care of children is typically seen as a feminine trait that comes naturally to women, yet in *The Giver* it is shown to come just as naturally to men. Jonas's father's association with caretaking is never treated as unusual or unnatural by other characters, suggesting a society that has moved beyond strict gender roles.

Jonas's mother, too, challenges the roles typically associated with her gender. Jonas says that she holds "a prominent position at the Department of Justice" (8) and is "the one responsible for adherence to the rules" (12) in the family's household. In other words, she takes on the more masculine roles of leadership, authority, and discipline, within the family and in her profession. While her husband is "calmer," she has "higher intelligence" (48), which Jonas explains gives their marriage perfect balance. Thus, *The Giver* emphasizes the importance of nurturing and intelligence, without assigning these roles to a specific gender.

Despite rejecting traditional gender roles in one area, Lowry introduces them through her depiction of "Birthmothers" – girls who are assigned at a young age to have three children before spending the rest of their lives doing hard labor (21). Jonas's mother is horrified when his younger sister Lily expresses interest in this profession, saying, "There's very little honor in that Assignment" (21). Their father explains that it is really the Nurturers who get to interact with babies, leaving the female Birthmothers in a marginalized position despite their importance in adding to the population and keeping society balanced. In this way, Lowry presents the one all-female profession in the novel to be one of the least honorable, revealing subtle gender bias beneath the illusion of true equality.

Other, more recent novels take a similar approach to a seemingly equal society. While *The Giver* was written for middle grade audiences in 1993, it has remained popular among

readers of all ages and helped lay the groundwork for later novels in the genre. Ally Condie's 2011 novel *Matched*, for example, also depicts a society in which there are few prescribed roles for men and women. Instead, the narrator, Cassia Reyes, lives in a world — simply called “the Society” — in which citizens are “matched” for everything from spouses to hobbies to jobs in an effort to maintain a perfectly balanced, optimum population. Marriages are dictated by a system that measures compatibility and genes, in order to guarantee “physically and emotionally healthy offspring” (Condie 19). In turn, the vast majority of citizens live to the age of eighty, at which point they die at the hands of the Society, albeit unknowingly. Cassia herself is seventeen, the age at which people decide whether they will be married or remain a “Single.” Cassia's “Match” is her childhood best friend, Xander, but she becomes the subject of an experiment that pushes her toward another of her classmates, Ky. This conflict prompts her to question her society and ultimately conclude that its perfection is an illusion.

As in *The Giver*, citizens of the Society are assigned to employment based on their skills and areas of interest, while gender is not taken into account. For example, the narrator, Cassia Reyes, follows in her father's footsteps as a Sorter, a position at which she excels. She notes that her great-grandmother was an Official, which suggests her society has had women in power for some time. Female Officials are prominent in the narrative, yet Condie rarely specifies the gender of nameless characters, opting to describe them by their features — “an Official with gray hair” (153), for example — rather than using gender-specific pronouns. In *Matched*, Condie presents a world in which gender roles have become obsolete because a new system has been put in place, one that is more efficient and beneficial to society as a whole. This is indicative of progress on the surface, as it suggests that the Society — the pinnacle of balance and efficiency — has determined that patriarchal values should not dictate the way the world is run.

These societies, while later exposed as deeply flawed and oppressive, on the surface represent an ideal typically associated with modern-day feminist movements — full equality of the sexes. Yet even before their societies are exposed as secretly oppressive and broken, Jonas and Cassia live in worlds that are largely dependent on successful heterosexual relationships, which reflects the real-life dominant social order in which same-sex relationships are viewed as deviant from “normal” sexual behavior. The obvious absence of same-sex relationships in *The Giver* and *Matched* is likely due in part to bias on the authors’ part, as well as a persistent fear in popular media that lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender characters will be poorly received. However, viewed in the context of the narratives, this absence of non-heterosexual characters suggests that the “perfect” society is, by necessity, completely heteronormative.

The presence of romance is one thing that marks *Matched* as much different than *The Giver* and emphasizes heteronormativity. Cassia’s society, despite its strict rules and matching system, appears less structured than Jonas’s, which allows a romance to occur. *The Giver* depicts citizens who are all essentially the same, regardless of gender, and who have been stripped completely of emotion and the capacity to love. On the other hand, the characters in *Matched* experience emotion deeply and are often driven by love. This means that the importance society places on heterosexual romantic relationships, and its influence on young women in particular, is more evident throughout *Matched* than it is in *The Giver*. The matching system creates a world in which young women’s lives revolve around partnership with a man, which in turn devalues other relationships, including familial ties and female friendships. Cassia notes that she and her best friend Em have been drifting apart, “not by choice” (140), but because the structure of society eventually forces teens out of their friendships so that their only remaining relationship upon entering adulthood is with their assigned spouse.

Another effect of the matching system is that girls are taught to be more focused on appearance than boys are — another reflection of modern day values. This focus on fashion contrasts with the clothing in *The Giver*, in which all citizens wear similar clothing to adhere to the concept of “Sameness.” In *Matched*, however, girls are more concerned about their appearance, especially when being introduced to their future spouse. Cassia thinks during her “Match Banquet” that she wants to look “calm and poised and lovely” (13) the perfect image of femininity in her green dress, for whoever she is matched with. At the same time, she is reluctant to be seen looking in a mirror for fear of seeming vain (7), despite the expectation that she look polished and beautiful for the event. This again reflects the expectation that teen girls, the very audience for *Matched*, look good without appearing to try. Such standards do not seem to apply to the boys in the book. Cassia describes the process of picking an outfit for the banquet: Girls go through hundreds of dresses designed by the government and choose the one that suits them. Boys, she notes, have only a few options for the style of suit they wear.

Although *Matched* rarely directly addresses the topic of gender, its neglect of the topic in some ways upholds the very biases that the Society seems to have eliminated. As James notes, “while [dystopian texts] offer females new roles, they also tend to demonstrate that these roles are bound within a patriarchal framework” (166). This is interesting in the context of *Matched* because there are few indicators of the Society being strictly patriarchal, yet modern-day gender norms seep into the text; thus, Cassia’s role is “bound within a patriarchal framework” both in her world and the reader’s. This is evident primarily in the novel’s heavy focus on romance, a topic which is present in other novels but not as integral to the plot. In *Matched*, Cassia’s platonic friendships — even with her prescribed “match,” Xander — quickly take a backseat to her growing feelings for Ky, which begin to define her choices. The two bond over Ky’s secret



ability to write cursive (most citizens can only type in a generic font on the “ports” installed in every home) and Cassia’s discovery of a forbidden poem, Dylan Thomas’s “Do not go gentle into that good night,” hidden in an old makeup compact from her grandfather.

Cassia finds power in the poem, as it tells her “what it means to rage, to crave” (Condie 97), and she repeats the line “Do not go gentle” as a sort of mantra while she discovers more about herself and the Society. At the same time, though, it is her newfound love for Ky that gives weight to the words and to her desire to change her world; he becomes her main motivation to rebel. Cassia gradually realizes that, because he is of a lower class — deemed an “Aberration” due to of something his father did — Ky is considered to be of lesser value by the Society and is therefore more exposed to its hidden evils. He becomes a lens through which she can finally see the flaws of the government, as his lower status makes him altogether more knowledgeable and perceptive of the system. Thus, Cassia remains in the dark throughout much of the novel, primarily learning how to write, how to lie, and how to love from Ky. It is their romance, not Cassia herself, that is rebellious.

The significance of this romance plot sets *Matched* apart from *The Giver*. While in *The Giver* Jonas is more focused on his training for what will be his adult job, *Matched* is more focused on romance and the conflict it creates, both between the main characters (Cassia, Ky, and Xander) and between Cassia and her society. This means that dating and marriage customs are a central point. Further, the protagonists’ motivations come from different sources: While Jonas is motivated by an inherent curiosity and sense of justice, Cassia is motivated to act only when the structure of her society threatens her relationship with Ky. The larger focus on romance in *Matched*, despite its similarities with *The Giver*, is again indicative of how the genre has adapted to demand from the slightly older young adult audience of girls ages thirteen to eighteen.

A romantic subplot between the female protagonist and a heroic male character is now expected and is commonly viewed as one of the draws of young adult literature for girls. The advantage of many dystopian young adult novels is that the plot focuses on questioning and changing society, rather than romantic relationships. However, the importance of romance to the plot of *Matched* also transmits negative messages about relationships to its readers. The fact that Cassia is focused primarily on a fledgling relationship is a departure from the action-oriented plots in some other novels in the genre, and makes her a more passive character.

Cassia's relationship with Ky follows a pattern in young adult fiction observed by Niranjana Iyer, in which, regardless of the female protagonist's level of competence, the "hero" is often more knowledgeable than she is (23), which grants him more power over the story. This is true of Ky, who possesses an uncanny insight into the Society that Cassia only begins to develop at the end of the novel. For example, Ky seems to understand the sorting system better than Cassia, despite her experience with it — he frequently throws games the teenagers play in their free time (230), and keeps his work in a factory exactly average so that he does not draw the Officials' attention. Because of this characterization, Ky is often the one making the plans and instructing Cassia.

The love-centered plot is unsurprising considering the novel's audience — teenage girls — who have long been the target for romantic stories. Yet *Matched* places far more value than usual on romance, using it as the main catalyst for Cassia's political awakening. Author Y.S. Lee comments that such a plot is less harmful if "the heroine is struggling with larger questions (identity, justice, faith, surviving supernatural warfare) and resolves these while getting her high school love en route" (qtd. in Iyer 23). This is not the case in *Matched*, which is why its surface-level depiction of gender equality falls flat. Even by the end of the book, Cassia struggles to find

a deep reason for her dedication to changing the Society, saying, “I fight the only way I know how, with thinking of Ky” (363). Although Cassia pushes the boundaries of her own society through her conviction that people should choose who they marry, she remains a passive character because her struggle never extends beyond her love interest. In this way, Condie makes some attempt to deviate from sexist norms, but the novel still upholds dominant cultural expectations for heterosexual relationships.

Cassia does make some progress as a character through this romance and, to a lesser extent, through the Thomas poem that connects her to her recently deceased grandfather. In the beginning of the book, for example, she is preoccupied with her appearance, a consequence of the system that reveals teenagers’ assigned partners to them in a flash on a screen. Later in the novel she says, “Then [at the Match Banquet], the question I asked myself was: *Do I look pretty?* Now, the question I ask is: *Do I look strong?*” (204). Thus, Cassia’s love story differs slightly from a traditional romance in that it helps her break free from patriarchal expectations of vanity, passivity, and silence. At the same time, though, the novel fails to meaningfully challenge these expectations, which reveals the “patriarchal framework” of which James writes.

*The Giver* and *Matched* take place in imagined societies that appear to have achieved full gender equality. However, subtle gender biases remain, which demonstrates the difficulty of creating a truly subversive piece of popular literature. Furthermore, while these novels may offer new or uncommon roles to both women and men, they present “ideal” societies that operate on the basis of exclusively heterosexual relationships, which reproduces real-life ideals that marginalize and trivialize same-sex relationships. The significance of these partnerships is especially evident in *Matched*, which has a heavy focus on romance that frequently requires the protagonist to be a secondary character in her own story even as she reminds herself of her inner

strength. *The Giver's* Jonas is never relegated to such a role and is motivated by his own sense of justice despite his younger age. This contrast demonstrates the importance of audience in young adult fiction — *Matched*, aimed at teenage girls, is more romantic, while *The Giver* is written for slightly younger audiences and has a more explicit lesson to teach. Still, this calls to attention novels with the same target audience as *Matched* that explore gender more with less focus on romance. Two of these novels, *The Hunger Games* and *Pure*, will be explored in the next section.

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### So Unlike People: Grotesque Femininity in *Pure* and *The Hunger Games*

One of the advantages of dystopian fiction is that its futuristic setting gives it the capacity to explore gender norms today by changing them in the world of the novel. While *Matched*, *The Giver*, and *Divergent* largely retain contemporary ideas of gender and equality, ideas of what constitutes femininity today and how gender may look in the future differ drastically in *Pure* and *The Hunger Games*. In the novel *Pure*, author Julianna Baggott creates two distinct worlds — a utopia-like “Dome” where the higher classes live in peace, and the outside world where the rest of humanity struggles to survive in a nuclear wasteland. Inside the Dome, women follow the conservative principles of the world before the explosions, which prioritized beauty, supporting male spouses, and having children. One official’s wife, scarred by the explosions, wears a sheer, flesh-colored full-body sleeve to hide her flaws, and is outwardly entirely submissive to her husband. Outside the Dome, however, survival is the main concern for both men and women, which leaves little room to follow conventions of gender. One group of women, for example, go from wealthy housewives to feared militants because of the explosions, with jewelry and even children fused to their skin serving as a reminder that they were once privileged enough to be feminine.

Suzanne Collins takes a similar approach to constructing society in *The Hunger Games*, in which a wealthy Capitol oversees twelve poorer districts in the country of Panem. There are many differences between these wealthy and poor areas, and gender presentation is prominent among those differences. The citizens of the Capitol are universally obsessed with fashion, and even men wear flashy makeup and undergo extensive cosmetic surgery in an exaggerated show of vanity. Meanwhile, the heroine, Katniss, must take on the typically masculine roles of provider and protector to survive in her home in District Twelve. In both novels, femininity is

important to the social structure of the upper classes. In the poorer areas, however, it is not essential for survival and is therefore all but obsolete. While neither novel portrays femininity as inherently weak, it is often impossible for characters to be both feminine and powerful. Further, both *Pure* and *The Hunger Games* create warped, extreme versions of femininity that are only available to a privileged few.

The societies in *Pure* by Julianna Baggott do not give any impression of gender equality, as *The Giver* and *Matched* do, but Baggott makes some compelling statements about modern-day gender roles. The world in *Pure* has been ravaged by “the Detonations” (1), nuclear explosions set off by a tyrannical leader who hopes to recreate the world into his own “New Eden” (192). The highest classes live in the safety of the Dome, where the people are controlled by genetic coding and strict regulations, which include archaic gender roles that hold women to impossible standards of beauty while rendering them submissive and devaluing their contributions to society. Outside of the Dome, on the other hand, chaos reigns. Survivors of the Detonations are fused to inanimate objects, animals, or each other and live under the authority of a militia called OSR. With survival being the top priority, women are not held to the same standards as those inside the Dome. These two distinct settings provide Baggott with a platform to critique gender presentation from multiple angles.

Baggott uses the points of view of four teenage characters, two of whom are “Pures” (people unaltered by the Detonations) living in the Dome, and two of whom have grown up in the outside world. The outsiders are Pressia, who searches for information about her mysterious parents; and El Capitan, an officer in the OSR. The Pures are Partridge, the son of the Dome’s leader, who caused the Detonations; and Lyda, who becomes Partridge’s love interest as well as an important character who illuminates life inside the Dome. Lyda is institutionalized after

helping Partridge escape and provides insight to the treatment of men and women in her more privileged society. In the Dome, where survival is not an issue, boys and girls are divided and treated differently from childhood. Lyda's thoughts and comments from other characters suggest that girls are valued primarily for their reproductive ability. For example, girls do not get behavioral coding or physical enhancements because it may put their "delicate reproductive organs" (57) at risk.

Despite the focus on women's importance in reproduction inside the Dome, women's other tasks are devalued. At a school dance, Lyda comments to her date Partridge (another point of view character) that male students are only allowed to take classes "that have real-life applications, like science." In response, Partridge says, "[W]hat good would it do us to know how to make a wire bird?" (61). Earlier in the novel, Partridge expresses doubt about the Dome's supposedly perfect society, but in this exchange he reveals the ingrained bias that is a result of social conditioning. Though he may have started to see through the façade of perfection, he cannot escape the attitude of superiority instilled in him by his position in society.

Outside the Dome, where the world is radically different, gender roles are all but nonexistent. In a world with little government or structure to dictate behavior, survivors do whatever they must to stay alive. However, characters' recollections of society before the Detonations are used to criticize traditional femininity as an oppressive construct. On a mission to rescue a friend from OSR, two important characters — Partridge and Bradwell, both male — discuss the "Feminine Feminists," a conservative group that encouraged women to be "pretty, feminine" and "nonthreatening" (221). Later, Pressia, a point of view character who has been promoted to an official position in the militia, is told that she "will have to balance her officer



status with her femininity” because power should not “be at odds with simple feminine virtues” (242).

Regardless of this assertion, power and femininity are frequently at odds in *Pure*. The type of femininity enforced by the Feminine Feminists is presented as inherently oppressive to the privileged few who come close to achieving it. For example, an OSR officer’s wife is forced to wait on her husband and wear a full-body stocking to hide her imperfections (238). In this way, enforcing gender roles is shown to be both a form of oppression on a larger scale and a form of individual abuse. At the same time, this type of oppression is nearly obsolete outside of the Dome. Femininity in the novel is associated with physical objects such as makeup and kitchenware, and tasks such as cooking and cleaning, none of which are relevant in the ravaged world unless they are needed for survival. Thus, femininity in *Pure* is associated with class privilege even as it oppresses the women it is forced upon.

Meanwhile, women who have been denied such privilege — women who live in the ravaged world outside of the Dome — move away from the impractical ideals of the past society’s gender roles, and adapt to survive. This group of women is called “the mothers” (273), and they are portrayed as “tactical and violent” (229), especially toward men, who they associate with death. At the same time, they are fiercely protective of other women. Once docile and wealthy housewives, the mothers are often fused to their children and household, feminine-coded objects such as jewelry and mirrors. Rather than hiding these objects, the mothers display them; for example, they “pick at the skin to keep it from growing over the jewelry” (227). This presents a warped version of the traditional femininity that cannot survive in the outside world, with the warrior women’s feminine markers being emphasized to reinforce the idea that femininity is not weakness unless the people in power make it so.

At the same time, the mothers take up masculine-coded, outdoor objects such as mower blades, hedge clippers, and chain saws to commit brutal violence against their enemies. In this way, the mothers have reclaimed formerly gendered objects as their own, all but erasing the line between genders. The mothers have become hybrids by necessity. They are trapped with the feminine markers of their past lives and wear them proudly, yet they morph themselves into warriors — a typically male role — in the name of protecting themselves and other women. They cannot separate themselves from the role of mother, so they redefine the word.

Of all the works that depict women taking up new roles, *Pure* perhaps makes the most compelling commentary about the gender roles of modern times. By depicting women driven to two extremes of femininity — either complete submission to men that results in loss of power, or complete hatred of men that results in entirely new, yet brutal roles — Baggott illustrates the consequences of total patriarchal control. The Feminine Feminists in the not-so-distant future, for example, represent a liberation movement that men have taken over to reinforce the “patriarchal expectation of feminine compliance and passivity,” which Patricia Kennon examines in “‘Belonging’ in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction: New Communities Created by Children” (44). The mothers, meanwhile, represent a radical reaction to such control. Blaming men for the new world’s problems, they create an all-female community with the sole purpose of protecting other women.

Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* is another novel that depicts many aspects of traditional femininity available only to a privileged few, but unlike in *Pure*, both privileged women and men exhibit feminine markers. The female narrator, Katniss Everdeen, lives in one of the poorest districts in her country, where she is constantly burdened by her responsibility to provide for her family. Because survival is paramount, Katniss primarily concerns herself with

acquiring food — everything else is frivolous. As Jennifer Mitchell notes in “Of Queer Necessity: Panem’s Hunger Games as Gender Games,” “to ponder questions of gender identity is to waste time and energy that would be better spent on sustenance” (132). In other words, Katniss simply cannot afford to concern herself with questions of gender; her identity is formed out of necessity.

For this reason, Katniss presents herself without any outward markers of femininity, both in dress and in emotional expression. Her clothes, for example, are plain and practical: hunting boots, trousers, a shirt, and a cap to conceal her long hair (Collins 4). Her emotions, too, are carefully concealed to keep herself and her family safe. Knowing that any stirrings of dissatisfaction with the government will bring about painful consequences, Katniss says, “I learned to . . . turn my face into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts” (6). Thus, Katniss retains an appearance of neutrality: She does not actively subvert or question societal norms, yet she also does not passively comply with what her society expects of her.

Visible markers of traditional femininity in *The Hunger Games*, such as dresses and jewelry, tend to be connected to higher classes, and Katniss only dons them when absolutely necessary. The dress Katniss wears for the Reaping, for example, comes from her mother’s life in the wealthier part of District 12 (Collins 15). Katniss describes it as “a soft blue thing” and comments that she does not look like herself when wearing it (15). Both of these descriptions serve to distance Katniss from the garment, and in turn distance her from her imposed feminine appearance, which she finds impractical. The clothing of hunting is much more useful to her, but it is inappropriate for the occasion.

Katniss’s preference toward practical clothing highlights her typically masculine role of hunter and provider, which she inherited from her father and which is not embodied by any other

female characters in the district. In *Representing Men: Maleness and Masculinity in the Media*, MacKinnon points out, “Masculinity may be understood partly by contrast with what is excluded from it — the feminine” (7). Because Katniss eschews all feminine markers, *The Hunger Games* seems to reinforce this definition, presenting masculinity and femininity in opposition.

Masculinity is neutral, practical, and comes naturally to Katniss. At least in District 12, it is the default state of someone trying to survive. Femininity, on the other hand, is frivolous and constructed.

The line between outward femininity and masculinity, however, is blurred in the Capitol, where all residents wear heavy makeup and outrageous clothing regardless of gender. Mitchell comments that the Capitol has a “fluid approach to gender” because “men in the Capitol play by exactly the same rules and use the same gendered markers” (135). Given this new approach to gender, there may be no set gender roles in the Capitol, but by modern-day standards the fashion of the Capitol can be construed as feminine presentation. Katniss describes the citizens on several occasions wearing heavy makeup, sporting outrageous hairstyles, and being consumed with vanity — all negative traits often associated with femininity. These “oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces who have never missed a meal” (Collins 59) have time for shallow pursuits such as cultivating their appearances, a privilege not afforded to poorer people.

Despite this over-the-top, effeminate presentation being the norm in the Capitol, residents of the Capitol who are meant to be taken seriously by Katniss and the reader maintain a more masculine — or at least less feminine — appearance. For example, Katniss says she is “taken aback by how normal” (Collins 63) her stylist, Cinna, looks in contrast to the “flamboyant” (64) fashions of the Capitol. Her description acknowledges the norms of the Capitol while distancing Cinna from the most peculiar customs of his home. These subtle visual cues help reinforce

Cinna's trustworthiness and validate his wisdom, as he appears less blinded by privilege. Collins uses the same technique to make President Snow, the tyrannical leader of Panem, more imposing. He is described only as "a small, thin man with paper-white hair" (71) and seems to exhibit none of the eccentricities of his people. Such depictions distance these characters from the more effeminate presentation of Capitol citizens, giving their role in the novel more weight.

The contrast between Cinna, President Snow, and the rest of the Capitol citizens is even more apparent in the film adaptation of *The Hunger Games*, in which viewers see the strange fashions and mannerisms of the Capitol firsthand. Applied to real actors, the appearance of Capitol characters compared to "normal"-looking characters is striking. For example, Caesar Flickerman (played by Stanley Tucci), who interviews the Hunger Games tributes before they are sent to the arena, is distinguished by his bright blue, carefully styled hair and his flamboyant personality. Claudius Templesmith, an announcer for the Games, is shown with curled hair and, in some cases, eye shadow. While women in the Capitol dress and act similarly, the presentation of male characters is what really marks Capitol fashions as unusual. These highly stylized, often effeminate appearances contrast with those of Cinna and President Snow, who retain their more masculine, reserved appearances and mannerisms. This, in turn, preserves Cinna's status as a formidable ally and President Snow's status as a serious, looming threat.

While *Pure* and *The Hunger Games* depict femininity and masculinity of the future in different ways, they both warp today's notions of traditional femininity while maintaining that it is dependent on privilege and wealth. Both the mothers in *Pure* and Katniss in *The Hunger Games* illustrate that traditional femininity is often impractical, as it is not essential for survival in a dystopian world. When the feminine is presented, it is primarily taken to oppressive extremes — as with the officer's wife in *Pure* — or warped almost beyond recognition, as with

the militant group of former housewives in *Pure* and the citizens of the Capitol in *The Hunger Games*. This, in turn, presents masculinity as a “neutral” or “natural” state. Meanwhile, outward representations of femininity as recognized to today’s readers must be abandoned or drastically changed to be powerful.

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### The Political Power of the Young Adult Romance

While young adult dystopian novels are often recognized for giving their heroines more active roles, they are also known for their romantic subplots. Such subplots are a staple in young adult fiction both because of conventional wisdom that they appeal to female readers, and because they provide a way to examine other young adult issues such as the formation of identity and dealing with change or loss. In young adult dystopian novels, the romance subplot is usually juxtaposed with the dangerous, warlike setting, which in turn causes it to be a vital part of the survival and the impending revolution for the protagonists. This use of romance as a catalyst for a political awakening mirrors the similar function of sexual desire frequently seen in canonical dystopias such as George Orwell's *1984*. In both cases, the protagonist's political awakening and involvement in rebellion is closely tied to his or her romantic (or more rarely in young adult fiction, sexual), awakening.

In "Revolutions from the Waist Downwards: Desire as Rebellion in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, George Orwell's *1984*, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*," Thomas Horan contends dystopian fiction presents, "sexual desire as an aspect of the self that can never be fully appropriated, and therefore as a potential force for political and spiritual regeneration from within the totalitarian state" (314). Mainstream young adult novels are more reserved in depicting sexual desire, but romance is a staple of the genre that often serves as motivation for the protagonist and is similarly depicted as being untouchable by the government. The importance of romance largely adheres to young adult fiction conventions while also giving the love subplot a new role in the novel. This is particularly evident in Ally Condie's *Matched*, but *The Hunger Games*, *The Giver*, and *Divergent* also use romance — and occasionally sexual desire — as a catalyst for political reform.



Presenting romance and rebellion as strongly linked is one way young adult dystopian novels combine different genres. They adhere to the common expectation that fiction aimed at young women contain romance, but they also challenge those conventions by setting the love plot in a story focused on war, political action, and the fight for justice. Beth Brendler addresses this in the article “Blurring Gender Lines in Readers’ Advisory for Young Adults,” where she observes that recent texts “combine action/adventure with romance, paranormal, fantasy, and science fiction elements” (222) and that the demand for them “is a contradiction of the notion that most girls do not like action, conflict, or science fiction” (224). In this way, by blending traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine genres, authors can offer a somewhat more diverse range of stories that present new roles for both their characters and their readers.

Possibly the best example of a novel that challenges conventions of romance is Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, which is ironically famous for the love triangle between heroine Katniss, her best friend Gale, and her Hunger Games ally Peeta. Yet this “romance” is hardly conventional; it is, at least on Katniss’s end, a performance that is necessary for survival. The Hunger Games are not only a test of survival skills; they are also, to some degree, a popularity contest in which the tributes who win over the audience get more sponsors. Katniss explains that gifts from sponsors can make the difference between life and death. Because she finds it nearly impossible to cultivate a different persona for the camera, Katniss is “silly and sparkly and forgettable” (Collins 134) at best, and surly and off-putting at worst. She only gains the upper hand when, in a pre-Games interview, Peeta confesses his love for her. When she becomes outraged by the stunt, Haymitch, her mentor, tells her, “He made you look desirable” (135). After some consideration, Katniss determines that being “an object of love” (136) is indeed a

good thing. Thus, Katniss, ordinarily practical and serious, is only memorable to Capitol residents when she is seen through the lens of her love interest.

The performative romance with Peeta becomes an important part of Katniss's survival strategy, especially in the second half of the novel. In "Of Queer Necessity: Panem's Hunger Games as Gender Games," Jennifer Mitchell argues, "Katniss is torn between two competing impulses — to cultivate the girly romance that has been cast upon her and to rely upon the masculine survival instinct that has so often defined and saved her" (128). In this quote, Mitchell seems to reinforce the gender binary that Collins challenges in *The Hunger Games*. It is true Katniss initially resists faking romantic feelings for Peeta to survive. From the time of the interview, when Peeta confesses his love for her, to the end of the Games, when an infected stab wound threatens Peeta's life, Katniss finds the concept of romance perplexing and embarrassing. When she realizes a more convincing act will win her more gifts from sponsors — "One kiss equals one pot of broth" (261), she muses — she has to call up memories of her parents to guess how people act when they are in love. It is evident from her calculating attitude in these scenes with Peeta that, despite the expectation that girls value romantic relationships highly, romance does not come naturally to Katniss.

However, for Katniss, masculine and feminine are not mutually exclusive labels, as she is able to embody both. Juxtaposing a "girly romance" with "masculine survival instinct" does not create a binary, but is instead another way in which Collins complicates the novel's portrayal of gender and highlights the importance of both traditionally feminine qualities (such as love, nurturing, and romance) and masculine values (such as survival). The roots of the romance are a testament to this, as it was originally Peeta's idea. Men may have constructed the romance to help "feminize" (Mitchell 134) Katniss and make her more sympathetic to the audience, but it is

obvious to the reader, if not the narrator, the Peeta's feelings for Katniss are real. Thus, the romance becomes less "girly" as it is constructed, and sought, by men. Peeta is the one seeking love, while Katniss focuses on survival.

At the same time, though, romance itself becomes synonymous with survival, which is where Collins further challenges the notion that romance is "girly" and, therefore, frivolous. Acting out the "star-crossed lovers" story with Peeta may initially contradict Katniss's usual strategy for survival, but eventually the two become one in the same. The performance of romance is not competing with Katniss's survival instinct; rather, it becomes part of that instinct. As Rodney M. DeaVault observes in "The Masks of Femininity: Perceptions of the Feminine in *The Hunger Games* and *Podkayne of Mars*," Hunger Games viewers "demand a hybrid of survivor and show-woman, who can slit a man's throat one moment and giggle and blush like a decorous female the next" (194). In this way, romance and violence become not only bizarrely merged, but also equal in importance — something Katniss initially struggles to comprehend because she did not see any need for romantic relationships when she was living in District 12. When romance becomes practical rather than frivolous, it also becomes a vital part of the so-called "masculine" survival strategy; or, in the world of the novel, it becomes part of the Capitol's "fluid approach to gender" (Mitchell 135), which renders traditional gender markers obsolete.

This blurring of gender lines, partially brought on by her fabricated relationship with Peeta, is a key aspect of Katniss's political awakening. Ultimately, she must embrace both sides of her nature — "masculine" survivor and "feminine" nurturer — to save both herself and Peeta from the arena. In the final days of the Games, Katniss's fighting and hunting skills become more important than ever as she struggles to protect and feed both herself and Peeta. However, it

is the love story they have built up for the audience that finally saves them both. When they realize only one of them can survive the Games, they pretend to simultaneously commit suicide by eating poisonous berries. Knowing the importance of having a victor and the power Katniss and Peeta's "love" holds over the audience, the Gamemakers allow them both to live. It is in this scene, with Peeta playing up the love story, that Katniss realizes the two of them are not completely powerless against the government. Thus, the end of the book continues the trend of connecting love with political power.

In terms of Horan's argument about canonical dystopian works, *The Hunger Games* is also noteworthy because the typical gender dynamic is reversed. According to Gottlieb (quoted in Horan 316), "Falling in love with a woman who offers affection, passion, or simply an intimate bond is essential to the protagonist's awakening to his private universe, an essential step in building resistance against the regime." Collins seamlessly flips these roles, making Peeta the one who provides affection and makes Katniss aware of her emerging political power. The night before the Games, for example, the two meet on the roof, where the following exchange takes place:

"I keep wishing I could think of a way to . . . to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games," says Peeta.

"But you're not," I say. "None of us are. That's how the Games work."

"Okay, but within that framework there's still you, there's still me," he insists.

"Don't you see?" (142)

In this section, Katniss realizes that while she has been focused on individual survival, "Peeta has been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self" (141). Until this point in the book, the only power Katniss recognizes in herself comes from her ability to take

care of her family — something Peeta also helped her do by giving her extra bread when they were children. Against the Capitol, however, she feels powerless. Peeta, on the other hand, sees power simply in retaining his humanity in the face of an event meant to strip him of it.

Eventually, Katniss recognizes this as well. When her friend and ally Rue, an eleven-year-old girl, dies, Katniss remembers Peeta's words and understands them. Finally confronting her anger at her government, she thinks, "I want to do something . . . to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do, there is a part of every tribute they can't own" (236-237). This exemplifies the message Horan cites from canonical dystopian fiction, only the more age-appropriate love (both romantic and platonic, in Katniss's case) replaces sexual desire as the thing the totalitarian regime cannot appropriate.

Peeta's influence on Katniss's views continues throughout the novel. As Lem and Hassel point out in " 'Killer' Katniss and 'Lover Boy' Peeta: Suzanne Collins' Defiance of Gender-Genred Reading," Peeta is the one "constantly holding [Katniss] accountable to the higher moral purpose behind their actions" (123-124). This is important because Katniss's political awakening is contingent upon her realizing there is a "higher moral purpose" worth following in the first place. While she acknowledges the injustice and cruelty of the government, her sense of powerlessness and her preoccupation with keeping her family alive prevent her from acting upon her anger. She initially views any political action as not only pointless, but deadly. Her growing relationship with Peeta, who sees worth in individual, internal acts of rebellion, helps her realize she can use both her survival skills and the audience's perception of her to benefit a larger cause. Thus, *The Hunger Games* retains the dynamic Horan examines, but uses the female character as the main protagonist while having the male be the moral compass that helps facilitate the heroine's political awakening.

This role reversal is also seen to a somewhat lesser extent in the female-narrated novels *Matched* by Ally Condie and *Divergent* by Veronica Roth. As in *The Hunger Games*, there is almost no mention of sexuality in *Matched*. Instead, it is evident from the start that the narrator, Cassia, will be spurred to political action by love. She discovers injustice in her society, as well as her desire to change things, when she begins to fall for a classmate named Ky. Because he is of a lower class than she is and has witnessed the war that secretly rages outside of their province, Ky illuminates the injustices that have been kept from Cassia. Through him, she becomes more aware of her privilege in society, which comes from her parents being in good standing with the government. For example, when she visits a food distribution plant as part of an official test, she begins to understand the dangerous working conditions for the poor, thinking, “I knew Ky’s job was hard, but I had no idea” (281). This, in turn, makes her more passionate about initiating change.

However, Cassia’s desire for change primarily hinges on her relationship with Ky, rather than a conviction that society needs to change for the greater good. Because they live in a world where people are “matched” with their spouse based on genes and other factors, it is actually illegal for Cassia to be in a relationship with anyone other than her assigned spouse (her best friend, Xander). Thus, the romance with Ky itself is rebellious even as it motivates Cassia to strive for larger social change. At the same time, though, it is a somewhat self-centered attitude that drives Cassia to rebel. While Katniss is influenced by a number of factors in addition to her relationship with Peeta — such as her family and her own firsthand experience with poverty and injustice — Cassia thinks almost entirely in terms of her love for Ky. When an Official asks her if she is dissatisfied with her match, she replies, “I think people should be able to choose *who* they match with” (246). This response sums up Cassia’s main motivation throughout the novel

— she doesn't realize how unfair her society is until it directly affects her by preventing her from being with whomever she chooses.

Like Peeta does for Katniss, Ky becomes a sort of moral compass for Cassia, providing a new perspective that helps her change her political views. In fact, one of their interactions bears resemblance to Katniss and Peeta's exchange on the roof:

"You don't throw something away just because they predicted it," he protests.

"But I don't want to be defined by their choices," I say.

"You're not," he says. "You never have to be." (312-313)

However, she is less an equal partner and more of a student. Her love for Ky motivates her to turn against the government, while Ky himself teaches her how to do so, first by teaching her to write and then by sharing his inside knowledge of the world outside their town. As Cassia observes while learning to write, "I live to sort; he knows how to create" (170). Here, she admits she has few skills relevant to a rebellion besides her newfound desire for change and her higher standing in society. Still, her role in the novel fits the pattern of the protagonist being spurred to political action by a love interest.

*Divergent* directly addresses sexual issues through its sixteen-year-old protagonist, Tris. In *Divergent*, citizens of what was once Chicago are divided into five factions: Abnegation, Dauntless, Erudite, Amity, and Candor. Tris is born into the Abnegation faction, which values selflessness above all else, but chooses to transfer to Dauntless, which values bravery. There, she witnesses violence and corruption, but also begins to understand romance and sex for the first time, having been sheltered from it during her modest upbringing. Tris implies that in Abnegation public displays of affection are discouraged, saying, "A kiss is not something you do

in public” (81). Her new friends in Dauntless tease her for her “frigidity” (81), giving the impression that being reserved in showing affection is a shortcoming.

Tris sometimes imagines what it would be like to kiss someone and finds herself attracted to Four, a leader of her faction who is two years older than she is. Before Tris and Four begin a romantic relationship, however, three boys kidnap Tris from her bed, dangle her over a chasm in Dauntless headquarters, grope her, and mock her for having small breasts. This is Tris’s unfortunate first experience with any kind of sexual contact, and Four advises her to deal with it by making herself appear weak so that the boys do not feel threatened by her strength. Tris proves incapable of doing this for more than a few days and ultimately tells one attacker, her friend, Al, “If you [come near me again], I swear to God I will kill you. You coward” (300). She thinks, “Somewhere inside me is a merciful, forgiving person. . . . But if I saw her, I wouldn’t recognize her” (299-300). The attack is a pivotal moment for Tris, as it forces her to take full ownership of her body, which until this point has been largely controlled by the modest clothing and gentle mannerisms of the Abnegation, or the brutal customs of the Dauntless. Eventually she must reconcile the anger exhibited in this scene with her gentler upbringing, which is important to how she handles being tied up in a war.

Near the end of the book, Tris is again forced into an unfamiliar sexual situation, this time during a simulation to test how she deals with fear. During the last part of the simulation, which determines whether she will be accepted into the Dauntless faction, she sees herself in a bedroom with Four, who kisses her forcefully. This simulation reveals a fear of sexual contact that even Tris was unaware of, seemingly as a result of her modest upbringing. She determines the way to pass the test is to “take control of the situation and make it less frightening” (392), which she does by physically changing places with Four so he is against the bed, and kissing him



on her own terms. This is another important step in Tris's journey of self-discovery as it allows her to see sex as something she can control, rather than something to be feared. In turn, she passes the Dauntless initiation test with a more complete understanding of herself, which later helps her make difficult decisions in the novel's final deadly conflict.

Lois Lowry's *The Giver* is one book that hints at emerging sexuality in its young protagonist, Jonas. In Jonas's world, citizens take tablets every day to suppress their sexual feelings, or "Stirrings," as well as their other emotions. Twelve-year-old Jonas begins to experience Stirrings in the form of pleasant dreams about his friend Fiona and subsequently begins taking his tablets. But when Jonas takes up his assigned position as the "Receiver of Memory" — who holds all of the town's memories so that citizens don't have to carry the burden of the past — he also stops taking the medication. This leads to a return of the Stirrings as well as a slew of "heightened feelings" (Lowry 134). As Jonas begins to understand the myriad ways his peers are repressed, he also begins to crave change so that other people can experience true happiness and love, even if it means making them feel pain and sadness as well.

Fiona, who is Jonas's "favorite female" (Lowry 140), has only a small role in the novel and lacks the sort of agency love interests, whether male or female, are afforded in other novels. In *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism*, Allison Waller points out, "Fiona . . . remains a powerless object for [Jonas's] desires, trapped as she is in the controlling system of the community" (118), while Jonas has the power to set himself free due to his new knowledge of his society. Jonas receives advice and moral guidance from his mentor, the Giver, but the realization that his society is wrong comes solely from his own observations, with little influence from another person. Fiona, like the other residents of Jonas's town, is a passive figure because, as the Giver points out, it is impossible for anyone without the community's memories to

understand why change is so essential. In this way, Jonas is depicted as one of the only two people with the knowledge and power to repair his society.

*The Giver*, published in 1993, lacks the romance plot of more recent works. This could be partially because it was written before large female fan bases made young adult dystopian fiction such a widespread genre, and partially because the protagonist is much younger. However, as one of the first popular works of young adult dystopian fiction, it certainly helped lay the groundwork for its newer counterparts. The changes made to the story in the 2014 film adaptation illustrate the changing audience and conventions of the genre. Perhaps in an effort to attract the audience that made *The Hunger Games* films and others blockbusters, Jonas is sixteen rather than twelve, and Fiona (also sixteen) is given a somewhat more active role as a love interest, illustrating how a romantic connection can lead to a more powerful political awakening.

In the film, Jonas stops taking his injections, which serve the same purpose as the pills in the novel. This leads to him discovering what it feels like to love, which is sometimes connected to his family and Gabe, the baby they take care of, but is more often connected to his growing feelings for Fiona. Jonas convinces Fiona to skip her injections one day, wanting her to experience the same feelings he does. This, in turn, shows her that she needs to help Jonas escape their town and release the memories back to its residents. She has her own moment of heroism near the end of the film, when she breaks the rules to help Jonas rescue Gabe from the nursing center and is nearly killed because of it. She even stands up to Jonas's mother, an official with the Justice Department, trying to convince her of the merits of real emotion.

Meanwhile, Jonas flees the community with Gabe, hoping to cross the border that will release the memories. During the difficult trek across barren terrain with little food or water, Jonas says, "It was the memory of Fiona that kept me going." Having promised her that he will

come back for her once the memories are released, Jonas uses his newfound knowledge of love as motivation for his quest. However, Fiona doesn't serve only as motivation for the hero; she makes her own choices based on new knowledge and gets to play a more active role in the plot. In this way, the addition of a romance actually empowers Fiona, making her a more dynamic character.

Incidentally, James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*, the only other book in this report with a male central character, lacks much of the romance of the other novels. The novel follows a group of boys with no memory of their previous lives, who are trapped indefinitely in a giant maze by a mysterious government organization that is conducting an experiment. The protagonist is Thomas who, like the others, wakes up in an elevator called the Box that takes him to the Glade, where he joins a society composed completely of young adult males. Eventually, one girl joins the boys, appearing in the same manner — through the Box in the ground — and speaking only one sentence before losing consciousness for much of the book: "Everything is going to change" (57). Being female, she is more of an "Other" than Thomas, whom the boys were also suspicious of when he first arrived. The boys connect her appearance, even more than Thomas's, to changes in the Glade, such as the doors to the Maze being left open at night and the artificial sky being turned off.

Thomas eventually finds out, through a telepathic link they share, that the girl's name is Teresa. When she wakes up, she begins to fill the role of potential love interest, which is mostly conveyed through hand-holding and "surprisingly pleasant" (237) chills on Thomas's end. However, the novel only ever hints at romance, which plays little role in the plot or in motivating Thomas. Instead, Teresa is a suspicious figure who eventually gains enough trust to help solve the mystery of the maze. Like the boys, Teresa remembers little of her past life, but she

remembers that she and Thomas were friends before arriving in the Glade. She also brings useful, if mysterious, bits of information, telling the boys the secret organization that put them there is good, and that the Maze is a code. Her inside knowledge, though limited, proves vital to the boys' efforts to escape the Glade. In this way, her role challenges Iyer's observation that "the hero invariably possesses inside knowledge about the situation" (22), which gives him more power over the plot and the main female character. While Thomas controls the plot, Teresa brings information and expertise, rather than the affection Horan cites.

The lack of romantic subplot in *The Maze Runner* calls to attention the importance of the protagonist's gender in young adult novels, and how dystopias can begin to change expectations. According to Brendler, early research (1998) into gender in young adult literature suggested "females were more focused on the relationships and romantic elements in the text, and males were more drawn to action and adventure" (221). Brendler also notes that teens preferred to read about protagonists of their own gender. Despite this, *The Maze Runner*, one of the few popular dystopias with a male protagonist, has drawn a large number of both male and female fans. The audience for the 2014 film adaptation, for example, was split nearly evenly by gender, with 51 percent of viewers being female (Hamedy 2014). This is slightly more equal than *The Hunger Games* audience, at 61 percent female (Young 2012); or the *Divergent* audience, at 59 percent female (Brennan 2014). These numbers seem to suggest that gender is a smaller factor, at least in this particular genre, than conventional wisdom suggests. The lack of romance in *The Maze Runner* doesn't significantly deter female fans, while the more romance-focused *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* had a sizeable male audience.

Authors of young adult dystopian novels, especially those with female protagonists, make use of marketable romantic subplots while also challenging conventions of the genre. This is

especially evident in comparison to canonical dystopias, as Thomas Horan notes that novels like *1984* use a female love interest as a catalyst for the male protagonist's political awakening. Collins, Roth, and Condie all reverse this convention, using a male love interest to inspire the heroine's political awakening. Lowry and Dashner, writing about male protagonists, use this strategy to a lesser extent, suggesting romance is more likely to be important to female characters than to male characters. The film adaptation of *The Giver*, though, uses Fiona's new role as a love interest to make her a more active character, while *The Maze Runner's* Teresa plays an important role in the plot. In this way, authors use romance, often considered frivolous or even regressive for female characters, to empower their teen protagonists.

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### Violence without Consequence: *Divergent* and Sexual Assault

Despite the importance of romance in young adult dystopias, few popular novels in the genre discuss the subject of sex. *Divergent*, in both its book and movie forms, is the only work in this report that directly addresses sexuality, including sexual assault and rape. In the book, there is a brief instance when the narrator, Tris, is abducted and groped by a male initiate before Four, her love interest, rescues her. This assault is used to drive the next scene, in which Four and Tris are drawn closer to each other as a result of her vulnerability and his worry for her. In the film, the groping incident is left out, but a scene involving an attempted rape is added in Tris's "fear landscape" (the simulator used to test Dauntless initiates' responses to fear). Both of these scenes stand out in the already-violent story because they involve a very specific kind of violence, but they are quickly dealt with and forgotten, causing them to lose their weight and appear meaningless in hindsight.

In the novel, after Tris does better than expected in her initiation training, several male initiates abduct her and take her to the chasm in the Dauntless headquarters, where they presumably plan to throw her to her death. When Tris, who has been blindfolded, hears the rushing water below, she thinks, "If we are above the chasm, I know what they intend to do to me" (276). The implication is that they are going to kill her, but the scene is clear that her attackers are eager to demonstrate their power over her, not just threaten her with death, as a means to scare her. One hand that grabs her is "big enough to cover the lower half of [her] face" (276) and at one point an attacker says, "Wonder what it sounds like when a Stiff begs for mercy" (276). These two quotes illustrate that both Tris and the boys are aware of the unfairness of the fight, and that the boys relish their power over her, which causes the scene to escalate.



The boys aim to, if nothing else, scare Tris into submission in the initiation trials, and in their attempt to do so, grope her chest and taunt her for the size of her breasts. One remarks, “You sure you’re sixteen, Stiff? Doesn’t feel like you’re more than twelve” (278). Tris’s reaction is realistic enough. Her narration includes statements like, “Bile rises in my throat and I swallow the bitter taste” and “I bite my tongue to keep from screaming” (278). She is sickened by the encounter, but refuses to let her fear show. Eventually, Four comes to her rescue, singlehandedly driving the attackers away and taking Tris back to his room.

The assault scene itself is ugly, if mishandled in some ways. Within a literary genre that considers violence par for the course, it could be considered an example of the young adult genre getting deliberately darker and delving more often into uncomfortable themes, as Megan Cox Gurdon criticizes in her Wall Street Journal article “Darkness Too Visible.” Yet the scene rings true to the experiences of countless young women who have had their boundaries violated by young men in a similar way. Tris is bruised, bloody, and has just clawed her way back from the verge of death — yet what scares her most about holding her head high and facing her attackers again is a brief but scarring touch and the threat of what could have come next.

Despite the ring of authenticity, the scene ultimately shifts from a moment of weakness for Tris to a moment of strength for Four, highlighting his essential goodness despite his intimidating exterior. In contrast to the boys who attacked Tris, Four is presented as mysterious but gentle. He is the ideal man and inevitable love interest, showing only the appropriate level of emotion even as the scene suggests that he cares deeply for Tris. He is violent, saying of one attacker, “He’ll live . . . In what condition, I can’t say” (282). Yet “his fingers are careful” (283) when he touches Tris’s cheek. His different behavior around Tris suggests that Tris, as a woman and romantic interest, softens him, allowing him to be sensitive toward her while still proving his

masculinity with disturbing acts of violence off the page. His emotions are linked to the feminine and his strength as a love interest, while his more stereotypically masculine traits, such as fighting skills, are linked to his strength as a leader.

As the love interest steps into the picture, the assault scene begins to come off as a setup for development of Tris and Four's romance, rather than development of Tris herself. It is followed by a somewhat open conversation about what happened, in which Tris confesses that her attackers "touched" (284) her. Upon seeing Four's reaction, she clarifies, " 'Not... in the way you're thinking.' I clear my throat. I didn't realize when I said it how awkward it would be to talk about. 'But... almost' " (284). Tris's description of the attack is intentionally vague; like many women, she is embarrassed by what was done to her, and doubts that she can hide her feelings later, as Four suggests. More than that, though, Four's anger upon hearing about the sexual component of the attack scares Tris into downplaying the experience, essentially silencing her.

Although Tris narrates the scene, the revelation that she was "almost" (285) sexually assaulted ends up highlighting Four's power within the faction and enforcing the notion that "representations of rape after the event are almost always framed by a masculine perspective" (Higgins and Silver 2). While the scene depicts a tentative sexual assault rather than rape, the aftermath scene does allow Four's perspective to come through strongly. In the few pages that the scene is discussed, Tris's thoughts are rarely depicted other than a few times when she says things like, "I don't want them to think I'm scared" (284). Instead, the scene focuses almost entirely on Four's reaction, from his body language to what he has to say about the attack. For example, when Tris confesses that the boys touched her, his anger dominates the scene. Observing him, Tris narrates, "His entire body tightens at my words, his hand clenching around

the ice pack” (284). This is just one example of the many ways that Tris is a passive player in the scene, while Four becomes the main focus.

Four’s violent anger toward the attackers also highlights another implication of the scene: Tris, as a woman, threatens several of the male initiates with her strength. Specifically, Four tells her, “He hurt you because your strength made him feel weak” (284). This remark is apparently meant to reassure the reader that the other initiates have taken notice of Tris’s strength, even though Tris still thinks of herself as “vulnerable” (284). On another level, though, the comment can be seen to draw a contrast between Four’s strength (which, since he is a leader and a man, is expected by the initiates) and Tris’s (which is threatening because she is female). In order to placate her attackers, Four tells her she must “show some vulnerability. Even if it isn’t real” (284). In other words, Tris must perform her feminine role as the “small, quiet girl from Abnegation” (284) that her attackers expect of her. She must conform to expectations, not of her oppressive society, but of a group of teenage boys in order to avoid being assaulted again.

In the film, there is no sexual assault in the adaption of the scene discussed above, but Tris’s fear of intimacy in the novel is replaced by a fear of rape in the movie. The two scenes are very different. In the novel, Tris is tentative but in charge of her sexuality, not shying away when Four mentions taking their relationship further in the future (405). When he appears in her fear landscape in a bedroom, kissing her until she realizes what is going on, the scene even has a slight element of humor to it, with Tris thinking, “*This* is the fear I have no solutions for — a boy I like, who wants to . . . have sex with me?” (391). By contrast, the film scene shows Four throwing Tris onto his bed and holding her down, then taunting her when she repeatedly tells him “no.” Rather than taking control by interacting with him on her own terms, as she does in the

book, she is forced to physically fight him off, which ends the simulation and signals that she has dealt with her fear appropriately.

In the context of Tris's attack in this scene, her fear of rape in the film may have made more sense. However, there is no obvious sexual component of the attack in the movie, and no mention of Tris being groped when she talks to Four afterward. Furthermore, the movie makes a point to show just how much Tris trusts Four, making it strange that one of her few major fears is that he, specifically, might rape her. In an earlier scene, for example, Tris and a Four, who has taken off his shirt to show off his tattoos, share a kiss on a rooftop. After a few seconds, Tris pulls back and tells Four, "I don't want to move too fast." He respects her decision, and the kiss ends.

The kiss scene in the film is handled in such a way that it looks like an endorsement for consent and is another example of Tris asserting her bodily autonomy. The movie is sprinkled with these moments. Along with the kiss and Tris fighting off Four in the simulated rape scene, there is a scene after she is dangled over the chasm in which she tells Al, "If you ever touch me again, I *will* kill you." In a movie for which the primary audience is young women, such scenes seem positive. Tris is a hero girls can root for who will not tolerate her body being violated. Blogger Beth Lalonde went as far as to call *Divergent* "a ferocious, determined three-hour long middle finger to rape culture" (2014).

It is true that both the novel and film contain feminist themes such as choice and consent when it comes to physical intimacy, as demonstrated by the examples above, but most of those scenes appear shallow or even harmful when examined more deeply. For example, in *Rape and Representation*, which examines portrayals of rape in various literary works, Higgins and Silver claim, "rape and sexual violence have been so ingrained and so rationalized through their

representations as to appear ‘natural’ and inevitable, to women as to men” (2). The added rape scene in the *Divergent* movie, then, merely reinforces the message that fear of rape is inevitable to an audience largely made up of young women. Although Tris fights off the attack in the end, she again must prove her strength in a way that none of the male initiates are expected to.

The scene is reduced to a plot device, in this case thrown in to give the appearance of empowerment to Tris while adding shock value to her fear landscape. In her book of essays, *Bad Feminist*, author Roxane Gay talks about this kind of “fodder for . . . entertainment” (135), saying that writers have the power to “critique rape culture intelligently and illuminate the realities of sexual violence without exploiting the subject” (134). Because the scene is so brief and ultimately insignificant (Tris never discusses her fear with Four, and it is never brought up again), it would seem to fall into the category of exploitation. Based on evidence in the movie, there may not even be a rape culture to illuminate in Tris’s world, since people are judged more for their faction than their gender. Additionally, since the scene was simulated, the filmmakers can gloss over the “realities of sexual violence,” allowing the audience to cheer for the heroine while illustrating to young women the “right” way to deal with sexual assault. If Tris had not stopped her attacker, she would have been kicked out of her faction, leaving her to live on the streets. The scene, then, portrays rape as a mere test — one that the victim fails if he or she does not stop it.

The addition of the scene becomes more disturbing when compared to the scene that was actually in the novel. Rather than being afraid of rape in the novel, Tris is afraid of sexual intimacy, which makes sense considering her faction rarely shows physical affection. She does not want to have sex with Four, but the scene is not framed as an attempted rape. Tris’s feelings are described as, “a different kind of fear — nervous panic rather than blind terror” (392).

Furthermore, the scene retains some of the surreal elements that the other simulations do, such as Tris's room containing mirrors when there are none and Four not speaking. By contrast, the scene in the movie is startlingly realistic.

Both sexual assault scenes are used simply to move the plot forward, and they are all too brief to properly address the subject matter at hand. The attempted rape scene in particular reinforces gendered power dynamics that exist in the real world but are only touched upon in the world of *Divergent*, making it a jarring and ill-fitting addition to the film. Although Tris's triumph over her attackers is used to send a feminist message of female strength to the reader or viewer, it ultimately contributes to a larger trend of sexual violence against women in the media rather than subverting it.

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## Conclusion

Young adult dystopian novels have made their mark on today's popular culture from bookshelves to movie screens. Attracting millions of fans around the globe since the publication of *The Hunger Games* in 2008, these novels, often written by female authors, have garnered special attention (sometimes including ridicule) for plots that give teen girls the power to substantially change their societies. Notable novels with female protagonists were *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, *Divergent* by Veronica Roth, *Matched* by Allie Condie, and *Pure* by Julianna Baggott. These are just a handful of novels in the genre with large audiences. All have also sold film rights to studios or have already been adapted into films. James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*, centering on a group of teenage boys, was also included for its popularity. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry was included, despite being published in 1993, because of its influence on the genre, its ongoing popularity, and its recent film adaptation, which changed the story in interesting ways.

This project sought to explore the way authors present these themes and characters, especially considering the novels' target audience of girls ages thirteen to eighteen. These novels reach a large number of people, both through print and film, and inspire the dedication of large fan bases. In turn, they have the power to influence their audience, the younger members of which may "lack the tools or the cultural context to view works in a critical light" (23), as Iyer points out. As such, it is important to examine the messages these works send, including those relating to gender.

Of the six novels in this paper, four stood out as portraying societies with gender roles much different from those in the present day. *The Giver* and *Matched* both feature utopian societies in which full equality is the norm, making gender roles obsolete. *The Hunger Games*



and *Pure* also depict gender roles as being obsolete, but only because extreme poverty and the importance of survival have eliminated the need for them. Because the world in these two novels is so different, the definitions of femininity and masculinity have changed drastically, giving the authors more room to explore how gender lines are drawn. All four of these novels take advantage of the futuristic setting, but they are analyzed separately because of their different approaches.

Young adult dystopias are particularly interesting from a feminist perspective because they've developed a strong association with female characters and fans. One of the things news articles frequently note about *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* is the "strong" female protagonist in each of these works. In this case, the media's repeated references to "strong female characters" seems purely in reference to physical strength; both Katniss and *Divergent's* Tris get into their fair share of fights in their respective quests to save society. In particular, Katniss's archery and survival skills make her a formidable character and contribute to her status as a "modern feminist heroine" (Firestone 209) who paved the way for Tris and the other female protagonists in the genre. This interpretation of strength may be surface-level, but it has certainly contributed to the view that many of the novels in the genre contain strong feminist elements.

*The Maze Runner* and *The Giver* stand out as novels with male protagonists that also have different themes than female-narrated novels. Because they revolve around boys, there is little need or opportunity to explore girls' empowerment the way *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *Matched*, and *Pure* do. While *The Giver* presents a society with little gender bias, its most significant characters are male, with supporting female characters playing much smaller roles. The 2014 film adaptation, released over twenty years after the novel's publication, makes the female characters more active. *The Maze Runner*, also adapted into a film in 2014, revolves

around a community of adolescent boys trying to escape a giant maze. The novel has only one significant female character, Teresa, whose sudden appearance gives the boys the key to escaping the maze. Teresa, like many of the supporting male characters in other novels, possesses inside information and works closely with the protagonist, Thomas, to help the boys free themselves.

The biggest advantage the genre has in offering new roles for female characters is the setting, which always necessitates that the heroine take action against an oppressive regime. A large-scale rebellion against the government in these novels is expected in the genre, which means female characters, almost by default, have active roles in fighting for liberation. This is one of the most interesting things about the young adult dystopian novel; it is one of the few genres where it is simply conventional for women to be on the front lines in the fight against a seemingly insurmountable threat.

Many of the novels also go beyond offering women new roles by challenging or critiquing conventions of gender in other ways. *The Hunger Games* and *Pure*, for example, both have supporting characters whose expression of gender defies modern-day norms. In *The Hunger Games*, the residents of the Capitol are all preoccupied by appearances, going to great lengths to fulfill their society's beauty standards. These standards skew feminine, with the men wearing makeup and over-the-top outfits as much as the women do. *Pure*, on the other hand, spotlights a militant group of former housewives who have been fused to the feminine objects of their past lives but have simultaneously adopted masculine tools and made them their own. In both of these novels, the futuristic setting gives authors a means to warp and examine gender norms.

A few heroines defy gender norms in some way, but more often they are forced to take advantage of pervasive stereotypes that paint women as weak, vain, and passive. Katniss, for

example, exhibits many “masculine” qualities, yet is forced into a more feminine persona as she acts her part in the “star-crossed lovers” story that wins her and Peeta support from the Capitol. Although she possesses the skills and knowledge to survive the Games, she is only appealing to sponsors when she’s portrayed as an object of love. When she doesn’t adhere to the expectations of her role, she is punished by not receiving medicine or food she desperately needs.

*Divergent*’s Tris is also punished for stepping outside the bounds of femininity. Although fearlessness and a penchant for violence are common among both men and women in her new faction, Dauntless, Tris’s high score during initiation tests anger some of her male peers to the point of kidnapping her, sexually assaulting her, and threatening her life. Her love interest, Four, informs her that the boys did this because they found her competence threatening. He advises her to pretend to be weak so that she doesn’t anger them again. In other words, she must adhere more closely to feminine ideals to avoid being punished. Tris finds that she is unable to do this, and eventually stands up to the boys who attacked her, but Four’s response is indicative of a culture that still holds women responsible for preventing their own assaults.

While authors in this genre usually make a concerted effort to challenge gender norms in some ways, characters are almost always operating in a patriarchal society with norms slightly different than they are today. The community in *Matched*, for example, relies heavily on heterosexual marriages arranged by the government’s complicated matching system. While there is no blatant gender discrimination, women are held to a higher standard of beauty and are expected to abandon friends and family for their marriage. In *Pure*, the idealized society inside the protective Dome is unquestionably patriarchal, with the Dome’s builder and leader being viewed as a father figure by the entire society. Conservative ideals from before a nuclear disaster

also bleed into the recently ravaged world, mandating that women be “pretty, feminine” and “nonthreatening” (Baggott 221).

In addition to the basic inequalities portrayed in the text, romance somewhat hampers the heroine’s independence. The pattern for a male love interest is relatively predictable. In most cases, the heroine is just beginning to understand or want to change the injustice in her society, and receives guidance and inside knowledge from a male character who is about her age. This dynamic sometimes elevates the male character to a place of greater importance in the narrative than the heroine. In *Matched*, for example, Cassia’s love interest, rather than her own actions, drives much of the plot.

However, authors also balance romance with other aspects of the plot, and sometimes use the setting to challenge romantic conventions. Notably, the love plot in *The Hunger Games* begins as a performance for Katniss, while Peeta’s feelings are real. Peeta sometimes acts as a moral compass for Katniss, which reverses roles established in canonical dystopian works. In *Divergent*, Tris begins a relationship with Four on her own terms, which helps her gain confidence in herself and her choices. And although the love plot in *Matched* is quite conventional, it also gives Cassia the tools to spark societal change.

Young adult dystopian novels have gained attention for forming an immensely popular genre where female characters routinely play significant roles. The nature of the novels’ settings gives heroines more action-oriented roles than they often receive in other genres and creates a common narrative of empowerment and liberation. Gender is a prevalent topic in these works, not only because they frequently feature female protagonists, but because setting a story in the future gives authors the space to comment on modern day behavioral norms. Many authors take advantage of this by changing norms of fictional societies, playing up stereotypes, and

emphasizing the value of both traditionally masculine and feminine traits. Because dystopias are now widespread and marketed to the masses, it can be hard for them to be truly subversive.

Romance remains a staple of most popular young adult fiction, and an emphasis is often placed on conventional beauty. Still, the genre has left an interesting mark on popular culture in recent years, inspiring scores of fans, parodies, and articles speculating about the future of women in publishing and in Hollywood. Although the novels' mainstream appeal makes it difficult for them to be truly subversive, their influence on young adult fiction and on roles for young women in popular books and films is notable.